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Layering Observed in Dropsoundings from IOP 1of fronts 92

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LAYERING OBSERVED IN DROPSOUNDINGS FROM IOP 1 OF FRONTS 92

by
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INTRODUCTION

Multiple cloud layers are very commonly observed in frontal weather systems. There are familiar reasons for the existence of some layered cloud, eg. boundary layer cloud such as stratocumulus, but in the free troposphere there is a need both to document the presence of such layers and to consider possible processes maintaining or dissipating layers within cloud systems.

The occurrence of stable and unstable layers in thermodynamic profiles due to melting precipitation is familiar. Above the melting level the sublimation process appears potentially important in the same respect. This paper presents observations from IOP 1 of FRONTS 92 which are strongly suggestive of layer characteristics influenced by subliming ice precipitation.

The observations available are primarily dropsonde data and satellite imagery, and thus do not refer directly to the detailed microphysics of cloud layers themselves. Thus no quantitative mechanistic calculations are possible for this case, and our deduction is indirect, since dropsondes are primarily a tool for investigation of mesoscale rather than cloud scale structure. However, a number of symptoms are evident in both thermodynamic and dynamical parameters evaluated from sounding cross-sections which are consistent with localised cooling at ice cloud bases due to sublimation. These are interesting from the point of view of mesoscale dynamics, and they also suggest possible model process studies and further measurements for model validation.

In order to place the observations in their proper context some earlier theoretical and observational studies of sublimation are first briefly discussed.

EARLIER STUDIES OF SUBLIMATION

The sublimation of ice crystals in the atmosphere is a rapid process. Clough and Franks (1991) demonstrated that its effects in the atmosphere are much more pronounced than the evaporation of rain in middle latitudes because of the large surface area and low terminal velocity (and hence long residence time) of ice crystal distributions compared to rain. In a simple model they demonstrated that descent of 10-30 cms^{-1} approaches moist adiabatic in ice precipitation, the limiting factor being exhaustion of the supply of precipitation. In dry conditions, the calculations of Heymsfield and Donner (1990) indicate maximum survival distances of order 100-400m for IWC 10^{-2} g m^{-3} (~1mm) ice particles falling into environments with relative humidities from 20-60%.

Harris (1977) studied the role of sublimation beneath ice cloud layers using a combination of 1-dimensional microphysical-dynamical model calculations and Doppler radar observations to provide a semi-quantitative conceptual model. The model calculations showed that sublimation is capable of inducing substantial cooling immediately below the base of cirrus layers, sufficient to cause static destabilisation of a dry air mass under the cloud. His models provided a useful set of predictions relating layer and downdraught development to thermodynamic profiles and microphysical characteristics. For airmasses of near-

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neutral static stability Harris estimated possible downdraughts of ms^{-1} order (.2-5 ms^{-1}), maximising at the base of the evaporative layer.

This behaviour presents the observational difficulty that the most pronounced effects of sublimation are likely to occur in the lower parts of the sublimation layer where precipitation has evaporated and so the radar return is weakest, but he showed a number of the predictions to be consistent with Doppler radar observations of downdrafts and wind structure beneath precipitating cirrus layers. More recently, Auria and Campistron (1987) used millimetre Doppler radar observations in a similar case to characterise the fine scale structure by the presence of four layers: (a) generation, (b) growth, (c) stratification and (d) evaporation. For these layers they presented mean and turbulent characteristic profiles for their case as reproduced in Fig. 1.

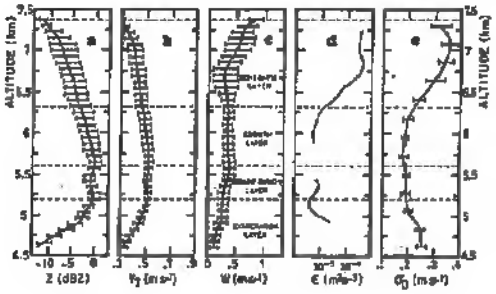

Figure 1 Mean vertical profiles of Doppler radar characteristics from a precipitating cirrus layer. (a) Radar reflectivity factor Z, (b) particle terminal velocity, (c) vertical velocity, (d) TKE dissipation rate ε,(e) Doppler spectrum standard deviation σ_D. Taken from Auria and Campistron (1987).

OBSERVATIONS

a) *Synoptic environment.*

The case considered here is IOP 1 of FRONTS 92 on 17th March 1992; Hewson (1992) provides an overview of the case and observations. Microphysical data are unfortunately not available, as the flight was intended to study a frontal wave using dropsondes.

Fig. 2 shows the surface analysis chart for 06UT from the UK Met Office Central Forecast Office. Thirty-two dropsoundings were made West of Ireland between 5.30UT and 9.40UT; their positions are indicated in the satellite images of Figs. 3 and 4. Both the analysis and the satellite images show the complexity of the system in the Atlantic, with several frontal gradients. Because of the unpredicted development of the low centre L at 35°W the wave did not progress inside 20°W and only the leading edge was observed in 3 dropsonde runs.

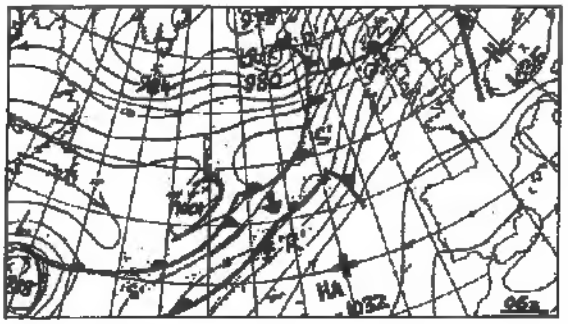

Figure 2 Surface analysis for 06UT 17 March 1992 from UKMO Central Forecast Office.

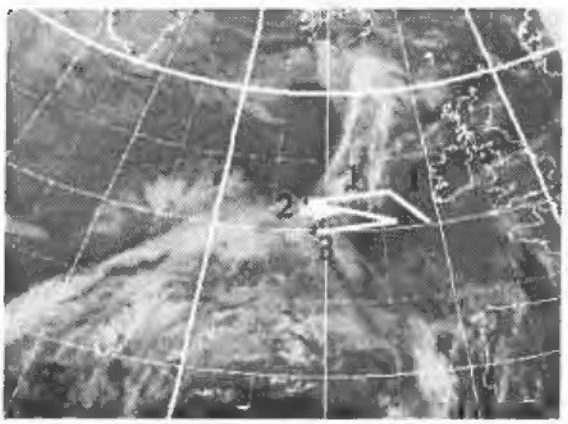

Figure 3 Meteosat infrared image for 06UT on 17th March 1992 with the track of the C130 aircraft dropsonde runs indicated.

The runs penetrate a region where a frontal zone has formed north of that indicated on the analysed chart. This is evident in the vorticity field from runs 2 and 3 (lower right of Fig. 8).[2]

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[2] The runs are numbered from north to south and illustrated W-E. Vector quantities have been evaluated with respect to an axis aligned at 20°E of N (parallel to the northern lower level cloud bands in the

The internal structure of this part of the system is complex and difficult to deduce because of the overlying high cloud, but study of animated satellite imagery together with the dropsonde observations indicates that the observed frontal zone appears to form where dry air of low potential vorticity (PV) in the lower troposphere (Figs. 5 and 9 below) initially ahead of the eastbound warm air mass recurves anticyclonically behind and above the warm front. The effect of this development is to "stall" the system by suddenly aligning the low PV features at both upper and lower level, aiding the extension of a trough in the warm front region during the day. Low PV values at upper levels can be associated with diabatic heating in the warm conveyor belt of the oncoming wave (see, eg., Thorpe and Clough, 1991), but the observations shown below strongly suggest that the low PV values are also associated in some degree with sublimation-induced cooling in this case.

The imagery suggests the above description most clearly around 0900UT (Fig. 4) where a near circular thinning of the warm sector cloud forms with anticyclonic progression (arc ABC in Fig. 4) near to and south of run 3.

The result of the development is the warm front of Fig. 8. This structure does not correspond to the conventional expectation of a warm front in that the post-frontal air is dry descended air of high θ values but low θ_w (not shown). The front might thus be described as a "kata-warm" front, analogous to the kata-cold fronts formed in over-running systems. Such complex interleaving of airmasses is an important dynamical aspect of the development of layered structures in frontal systems, and these observations show several layer features beyond those discussed here, which might be dynamically induced or remnants of similar processes operating at earlier times. Dynamical factors such as wind shear are not the primary topic of this note, but they cannot be ignored in this context. The internal structure of frontal systems in mid-troposphere beneath the cloud shield is hitherto virtually unexplored.

b) *Cross-section structure*

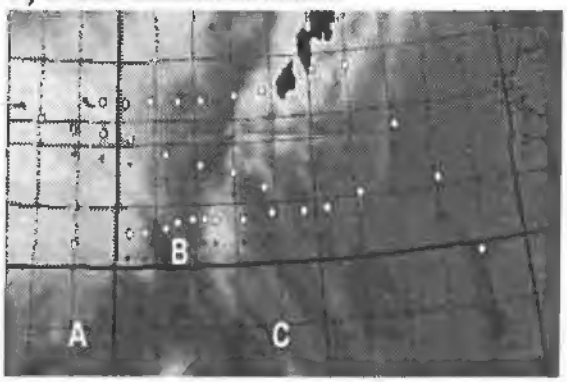

Figure 4 Meteosat infrared image for 09UT on 17th March 1992. Dropsonde positions are indicated with crosses. The arc ABC indicates the northern part of the anticyclonic clearance referred to in the text.

Fig. 5 shows the relative humidity pattern from run 3. The overhanging shelf to the upper left is due to the cloud band shown in the north of Fig. 4, which slopes above the dry descending air through all three runs. Close below it a dry tongue extends with a sharp gradient between. This region is marked by a pronounced transition from high in-cloud static stability to a layer of low values within a few hundred metres, illustrated in Fig. 6.

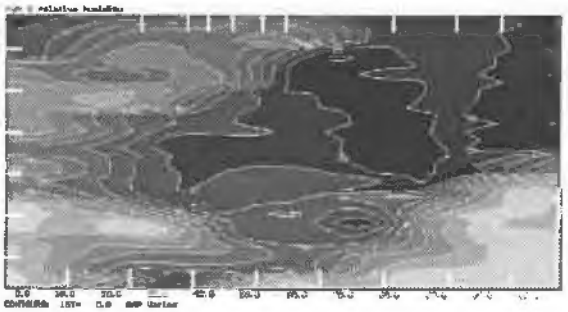

Figure 5 Cross-section of relative humidity from run 3. Sonde locations are marked at top, 50km tickmarks below and 1km vertically.

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area) and a two-dimensional assumption made. The sections are shown as the projections perpendicular to the axis, objectively analysed by the methods outlined in Browning et al. (1995). From the imagery it is clear that there is substantial three dimensionality, but the structures discussed here (unless otherwise indicated) are found to be common to 2 or 3 runs, and patterns qualitatively insensitive to rotation of this axis by 20° in either direction.

The tephigram in Fig. 7 from the westernmost sonde of run 3 shows marked instability typical of that to be expected from sublimation-induced cooling into a dry layer. The instability around 680 hPa is the most marked observed, and corresponds to the deepest cloud and hence largest precipitation rate. This is in accord with the predictions of Harris (1977), who found that precipitation rates were the main determining characteristic of sub-cloud temperature deficits, values of up to 2°C being associated with precipitation rates of .1-.2 mm h^{-1}.

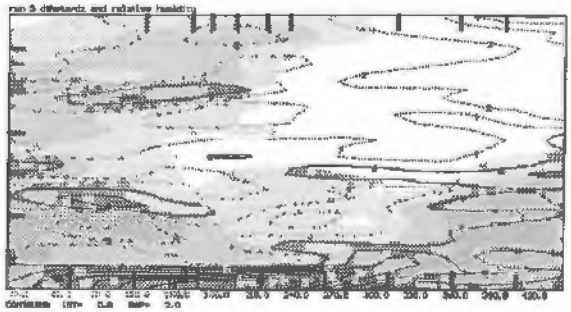

Figure 6 Static stability dθ/dz from run 3 (contoured at intervals of 2°C km^{-1}, solid for 6°C km^{-1} and above, dashed below) overlaid upon relative humidity (shaded with thresholds 30%,60%,90%)

The above thermodynamic signatures are accompanied by consistently defined characteristics in the independently measured velocity fields. Fig. 8 shows dv/dx, a two-dimensional approximation to the vorticity from run 3. The figure shows a transition from high to low vorticity close to the cloud transition. The correspondence is clearly limited by the distribution of sondes at the end of the run, but similar features are found in run 2 with a uniform denser distribution of sondes. Such a signature is particularly interesting in that it differs from the low PV (Fig. 9),and hence low vorticity, that might be expected in the cloudy warm sector airmass generally, since it is outflowing from the upper part of the region of latent heating due to ascent. Despite the approximation necessarily involved in such derived parameters the patterns observed in consecutive runs are consistent down to quite detailed features. The dipolar pattern of high in-cloud values and low sub-cloud values is fully consistent with a local signature of sublimation-driven cooling.

A further symptom which would characteristically be associated with such a sublimation layer is mixing, and it is correspondingly observed that the main upper windshear layer (not shown) is displaced to the base of the low PV region beneath the cloud.

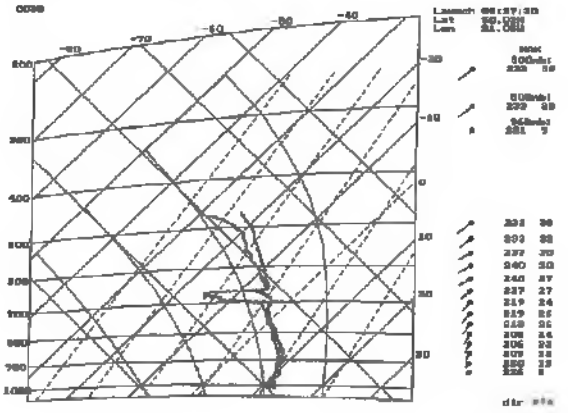

Figure 7 Tephigram showing the westernmost sounding of run 3.

CONCLUSIONS

If sublimation-induced layering is quantitatively important in temperate weather systems it is most likely to be in the warm frontal region beneath the main cloud shield. This is a situation which has rarely been studied, partly because of the lack of strong surface weather signatures to inspire case studies. The situation discussed above appears suitable, and shows dynamical characteristics consistent with an earlier model, and large enough to consider them important. Given also the complexity of the satellite imagery in warm sector regions it also suggests dynamical and process scenarios of some interest which are less

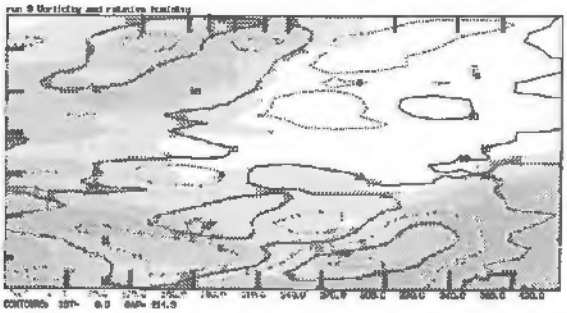

Figure 8 2-d vorticity (dv/dx x10^5 s^{-1}, solid contours at intervals of 10, dashed at intermediate 5 units) from run 3 overlaid upon relative humidity (shaded with thresholds 30%, 60% and 90%).

prone to the complicating effects of boundaries than the cold front zones most studied, but sensitive to basic processes and their parameterization in models.

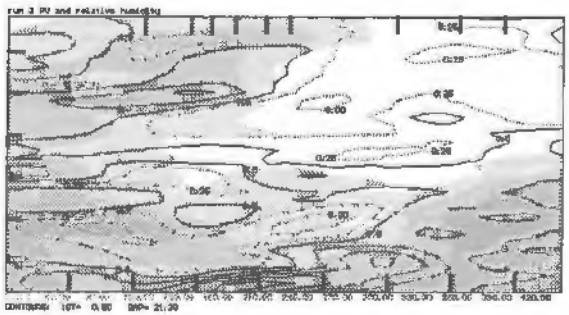

Figure 9 2-d PV approximation (units of 10^{-6} m^2 s^{-1} K kg^{-1}) for run 3, overlaid on relative humidity.

Rather than a complete and self-contained study of ice sublimation this note has provided indirect evidence strongly suggesting an important role for the process, and noting evidence of the associated atmospheric characteristics. It is of both practical and theoretical interest to verify the process scales with direct small scale observations, possibly in FASTEX. As well as investigating factors influencing the dynamics of systems, such studies should provide useful evidence for validation of mesoscale model schemes, both in sublimation and turbulence areas. Since many models do not explicitly and accurately describe ice precipitation, or resolve the shallow scales indicated, this may be a demanding test of model performance.

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